

# John Robinson on Situation Ethics

## 1. **Who** was John Robinson and what are his key ideas on situation ethics?

John Robinson (1919-1983) was a British priest and theologian who shot to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century after the publication of his sensational book, *Honest to God*, in 1963. He was born to Arthur Robinson, a canon of Canterbury Cathedral, and into Christianity, a commitment he maintained until his death despite some doctrinal disagreements with the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion. In 1942, he received a first-class BA in theology from the University of Cambridge, followed by a MA in 1945 and a PhD in 1946, which was also the year in which he became a priest. His most senior clerical appointment was as Bishop of Woolwich, a post he accepted in 1959 and from which he wrote *Honest to God*. In the aftermath of the controversy and popularity with which his book was greeted, in 1969, he became a Fellow and Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge; a position he occupied until his untimely death at the age of 64. *Honest to God* remains his most enduring and widely read work and contains his key ideas on God, Jesus, and Christian ethics (as listed below).

### **Situation ethics is interpersonal:**

situation ethics depends upon an interpersonal reconception of the nature of God. God is not up there in heaven or out there beyond the universe; God is the ultimate reality that is encountered through personal relationships. This is often expressed as the idea that God is love.

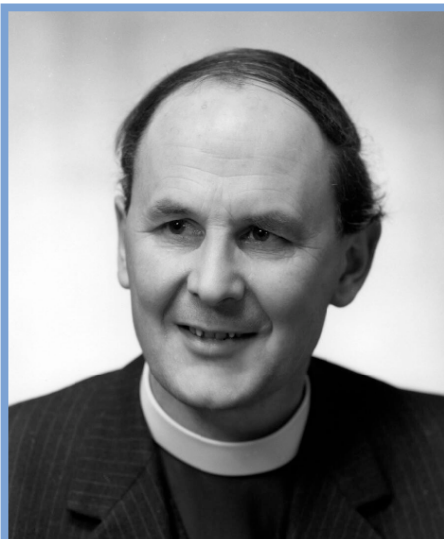
### **Situation ethics is Christological:**

situation ethics also depends upon a Christological reconception of the nature of Jesus. Christians should not interpret the nativity story literally when trying to make sense of Jesus; instead, they should interpret it as a myth that expresses the idea that Jesus is the embodiment of love.

### **Situation ethics is situational:**

fairly obviously, situation ethics is situation-dependent, which is a departure from the mainstream moral tradition in Christianity. The right decision is the one that is most loving in a given context, not necessarily the one that appears to be commanded by Jesus in the New Testament.

## 2. **How** do John Robinson's key ideas on situation ethics work?



**John Robinson**

John Robinson's key ideas on situation ethics are primarily concerned with the nature of God and Jesus, which he redefined in the opening chapters of *Honest to God*. From the reconceptualisation of the nature of God and Jesus, as, respectively, love and the embodiment of love, John Robinson built an argument for radically changing Christian morality. This led to the idea that ethics should be thoroughly situational; in other words, that ethical decision-making should be guided by love on a case-by-case, context-specific basis.

**Situation ethics is interpersonal:** John Robinson's first key idea is that God is "the deepest, veriest truth about the structure of reality." An idea he sometimes reiterated, following Paul Tillich (1886-1965), by claiming that God is deep down instead of up there or out there. John Robinson argued that the most fundamental element in the universe is love (rather than the atom) and that this is what human beings should identify as "God". He asserted that this element (i.e. love) is still transcendent because it is ultimately inaccessible, at least fully; however, people can still encounter it through loving, personal relationships with one another, especially those that help people in great need.

**Situation ethics is Christological:** the word "Christology" refers to the branch of Christian theology concerned with the nature and person of Jesus (i.e. the question of what or who Jesus is). John Robinson's second key idea on situation ethics is that it is Christological; in other words, situation ethics is very closely connected to a particular idea about what Jesus is. This idea is that Jesus is the human embodiment of the fundamental element in the universe: love. Consequently, Jesus acts like a window through which Christians can peer at God. Like the reconceptualisation of the nature of God, this is a radical idea that courted a considerable amount of controversy; in articulating this belief, John Robinson denied the literal interpretation of both the nativity story (found in differing versions in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke) and the prologue in the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, the claim is that God is love and love is embodied by Jesus, which sets up his next key idea nicely.

**Situation ethics is situational:** John Robinson's third key idea is that situation ethics is situational, which sounds tautological (and it is, as it is expressed here). He argued that if God is love and love is embodied by Jesus, then Christians should radically reconsider how they resolve moral dilemmas. He made a compelling case for interpreting the apparent commands of Jesus, which are often embedded in parables, as examples of loving actions instead of absolute demands or universal principles. For example, he stated that the Sermon on the Mount (an extended block of teaching in Matthew 5-7) is commonly understood as a command against divorce under any circumstances; however, he claimed this is a misinterpretation. Instead, John Robinson argued that it is a command against divorce when it is undertaken for selfish reasons. Following Joseph Fletcher, John Robinson argued that Jesus would have accepted divorce in any situation in which it was genuinely the most selflessly loving action.

3. **Why** are John Robinson's key ideas on situation ethics important?

**They redefine Christian ethics situationally:** it is in the name, of course, but John Robinson's key ideas on situation ethics make a compelling case for redefining Christian ethics on a case-by-case, context-specific model. They challenge the absolutist tradition in Christian morality with a convincing alternative.

**They challenge disillusioned Christians with new ideas:** atheists and disillusioned Christians share a common scepticism in Christianity as an organised religion. John Robinson proposed stripping Christianity of some of its outdated beliefs and reclothing it in a way that would make it immediately relevant to more people.

**They radically reframe Christian conceptions of God and Jesus:** perhaps most importantly, John Robinson's key ideas involve a revolutionary reconceptualisation of the nature of God and Jesus. Even though part of this work had already been undertaken by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), and Paul Tillich, who *Honest to God* borrows from extensively, John Robinson provided a persuasive portrait in a single, slim volume. He argued that this is the only way for humanity "come of age" to make sense of God and Jesus in the modern world.



**Trinity College, Cambridge:** home to John Robinson as a student and, later, as its Dean.

### George Thinks

Truly, *Honest to God* is an amazing book, and, at least in my opinion, it's rightly been a huge success ever since its original publication. Having said this, it's not primarily to do with situation ethics, which is important to remember. John Robinson realised that Christianity was in steep decline, largely because intelligent Christians (his words, not mine) find it almost impossible to believe in the existence of some benevolent, bearded superman up there in heaven or out there beyond the universe. This begs two questions: what is God, and where is he? John Robinson claimed that he was the deep down, fundamental element of the universe, love, and that this was embodied in the person of Jesus. From here, situation ethics is in many ways an inevitable byproduct of such thinking; because God is love, love must become our guiding star when resolving moral dilemmas. As John Robinson put it, quoting Joseph Fletcher's sensitive retranslation of Augustine of Hippo: "Love and then what you will, do." And, if you get to read *Honest to God*, I think it's challenging not to hear the call of these moving words.

